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MARKING THE SITE OF OLD FORT ST. JOSEPH

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When the boundaries of New France were extended over the Mississippi Valley, in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, one of the principal highways by which the French passed from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi was by way of the St. Joseph River to the Kankakee Portage, and thence down that stream and the Illinois to the Father of Waters. This was the favorite route of LaSalle between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi, and in his first entrance to the Illinois country in 1679, he constructed Fort Miami at the mouth of the St. Joseph-Kankakee highway. The story of Fort Miami, like the annals of the poor, is short and simple. The year following its construction, it was destroyed by some of LaSalle's own mutinous men. LaSalle shortly had a second fort constructed on its site, but it was maintained for only a few years. Yet the brief existence of Fort Miami gave rise to two cardinal historical errors, each of which enjoyed a much longer lease of life than the ill-fated fort itself. The first of these identified Fort Miami with the site of the future Chicago, and was a potent factor in the growth of the tradition, still more or less credited, of a French fort at Chicago in the latter part of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries.¹ The second error confused the site of Fort Miami with its longer-lived successor at the southeast corner of Lake Michigan, Fort St. Joseph.

The obscurity which has so long attended the site of Fort St. Joseph, for almost a century one of the important centers of trade and control of the Great Lakes region, is somewhat puzzling. Even Parkman, the learned historian of Pontiac's conspiracy, and of new France in general, locates it at the mouth of the St. Joseph River, thus confusing it with the site

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¹ On the subject of a French fort at Chicago, see Quaife, *Chicago and the Old Northwest*, 42-50.

of Fort Miami. Yet there are maps and records in abundance which establish at least the broad fact that Fort St. Joseph was a considerable distance inland at a point not far from the portage to the Kankakee.¹ Later, students did not fail to notice this, but there was still confusion as to the exact site of Fort St. Joseph. Consul W. Butterfield placed it in northern Indiana, about two miles below South Bend.² The late Dr. Thwaites for long agreed with Butterfield,³ although he seems ultimately to have adopted the view now commonly accepted, that the actual site of the fort was within the present limits of the town of Niles, Michigan.⁴

The confusion of the general public concerning a point in northwestern history, about which men like these were in error, requires no explanation. The present writer does not assume to say who first pointed out in print the true location of Fort St. Joseph.⁵ Whoever it was, the real credit for the discovery belongs to a little group of residents of Niles, who were imbued alike with a love for nature and for local history. For a number of years these enthusiasts pursued their walks and explorations in search of Indian relics and other historical remains. At length four of them united, for the further pursuit of their avocation, under the name of the Society of the Miami Cross.⁶ This name was derived from the double fact of the former residence of the Miami Indians in the vicinity and the presence of a large wooden cross which still stands on a slight bluff immediately in the rear of the fort site. Local tradition recites that the first settlers in this locality, in the early nineteenth century, found a similar cross standing in this place, and as often as it has decayed since then, it has been replaced by a new one. The miniature society took for its badge a round silver device made from a stone mould found across the river from the fort, which is supposed to have been used by some early trader to manufacture base metal medals to trade

¹ For a number of references on this point, see *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, XI, 178, n. 5, McCoy, "Old Fort St. Joseph," in *Michigan Pioneer Collections*, XXXV, 545-552; Mason, *Chapters from Illinois History*, 298.

² *Magazine of Western History*, III, 447.

³ At least from 1888 until 1904. See *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, XI, 115, 178-179, notes, and *Jesuit Relations*, LXVI, 348, n. 48.

⁴ Thwaites, *France in America*, 290; *Early Western Travels*, I, 117, n. 85.

⁵ Two such references, each of scholarly character, are Baker, *St. Joseph-Kankakee Portage*, South Bend, 1899, 43, and Mason, *op cit*, 298.

⁶ The four founders of the society were Prof. E. H. Crane, Hillis Smith, E. D. Lombard, and L. H. Beeson.

to the Indians. A more unique organization than the Society of the Miami Cross would be difficult to find in all America; and it were to be wished that in every place throughout the West men imbued with similar zeal for the cause of local history might be found.

The exploring expeditions carried on by the little group of enthusiasts established with seeming conclusiveness the exact site of Fort St. Joseph. Tomahawks, beads, military buttons, hand-made nails, and in short all the characteristic debris to be expected in such a place, were found in astonishing abundance in a plot of ground a few acres in extent, on the bank of the river about one-fourth of a mile north of the southern boundary of the town.¹ Nowhere else along the St. Joseph have such remains been found in any quantity, and this fact, taken in connection with the other one, abundantly established by the early records, that the fort was located somewhere in the vicinity of the portage, is taken to establish the exact location of the fort.

Two years ago, Mr. Lewis H. Beeson, of Niles, conducted the writer to the site of Fort St. Joseph, and related many interesting stories concerning the local traditions, and the activities of the group of local collectors. A prized memento of this visit is a scalping-knife from Mr. Beeson's own large and important collection. Incidentally, an inspection of this helped to settle a point then troubling the writer concerning the Indian trade. When, in 1822, Senator Benton of Missouri made his assault in the Senate upon the government factory system, one of his principal charges was that the goods selected for the trade by the superintendent were in general unsuitable. Upon one item in the invoice of the previous year for the chain of government factories, eight gross of jew's-harps, the speaker fairly exhausted his well-known powers of sarcasm and invective. Yet the jew's-harp was a common article of the Indian trade, and Mr. Beeson has in his collection from the site of Fort St. Joseph alone, several dozens of them.

The awakening interest locally in the historic associations connected with the city's past, crystallized about two years ago in the determination on the part of a few public-spirited women to erect a permanent memorial to mark the site of the ancient

¹ Mr. Lewis H. Beeson tells me that when Edward G. Mason, an acknowledged authority on the French period of Northwestern history, visited Niles and was shown some of the local collections of Indian relics, he found no words to express his amazement at their abundance.

stronghold. A large boulder, "probably the largest pebble in southern Michigan,"¹ resting a few miles south of the place, was selected for the marker. By art exhibits, rummage sales, solicitation of funds, and the various methods known to determined women, the sum needed for the work, about \$1,000.00, was raised. On July 4, 1913, in the presence of a large crowd of people, with appropriate ceremonies, the marker was unveiled,² revealing this inscription:

FORT
ST. JOSEPH
1697-1781

The ceremonies were conducted by the Fort St. Joseph Historical Society, which was organized for the purpose of perpetuating the memory of the stronghold whose name it bears.³

It is aside from the purpose of the present article to narrate the history of Fort St. Joseph, yet a few words may be said by way of indicating its dramatic character. The dates on the marker are intended to indicate the beginning and end of St. Joseph as a military station, but as a missionary station it began earlier, and as a trading center lasted longer. For two-thirds of a century, the Lilies of France floated over the fort, then at the close of the Seven Years' War, the red cross of St. George took their place. Before long the dread conspiracy of Pontiac was consummated, and Fort St. Joseph supplied one chapter in the lurid drama. In less time than it takes to tell of it the little British garrison was slaughtered, only the commander and three of his men being spared.

With British control reestablished in the Northwest, St. Joseph continued to be an important trading center, and when the Revolution came, it once more acquired military importance. At various times in the long see-saw contest between George Rogers Clark, operating from the Illinois country, and the British from Mackinac and Detroit, for the control of the Northwest, St. Joseph became a factor in the situation. Late

¹ Estimated to weigh seventy tons.

² It should be noted that the marker does not stand on the exact site of the fort, since this is now covered with water, due to the building of a dam across the St. Joseph for power development purposes.

³ The names of the following officials of the Society, who took a prominent part in the work for which it was created, should be recorded: Mrs. John Ferguson, president; Mrs. Ralph Ballard, vice-president; Miss Sarah Machin, treasurer; and Mrs. George E. Gillam, secretary.

in 1780, the place was plundered by a band of American raiders from Cahokia, but the marauders were promptly pursued and practically wiped out in a battle which occurred a short distance southeast of Chicago.

The military annals of Fort St. Joseph conclude with perhaps the most dramatic incident in all its history. In this same year of 1780, the British made a formidable attack upon St. Louis, then the Spanish capital of upper Louisiana. Beaten off the first time, they set about making preparations for a more vigorous assault the following year, and in this connection gathered a supply of corn at St. Joseph. Profiting, possibly, by the example set by George Rogers Clark in the capture of Vincennes, the Spanish governor at St. Louis determined to anticipate the blow. On January 2, 1781, a little Spanish expedition set out from St. Louis, and after a midwinter march of 400 miles across the wilderness, fell suddenly on the unsuspecting settlement of St. Joseph and subjected it to a second plundering. During the brief stay of the invaders, the Spanish flag floated over St. Joseph, and the ceremony of taking possession of the place in the name of the King of Spain was gone through. The exploit of the Spaniards, while daring enough, has acquired a fame out of all proportion to its real importance, by reason of the part it played in the diplomatic battle for the possession of the Northwest in the peace negotiations of 1783.

In conclusion, I desire to call attention to a source which sheds light on the question of the location of Fort St. Joseph, which has, so far as I am aware, been unknown hitherto to students of the subject. In the Chicago Historical Society library is a manuscript, yellow with age, entitled "William Johnston's notes of a tour from Fort Wayne to Chicago, June, 1809." Fifteen miles below the forks of the Elkhart and St. Joseph rivers, the traveler came to a French trading station, the activities of whose inmates he describes with some detail. Evidently this station was "Parc aux vaches," where the Detroit-Chicago trail crossed the St. Joseph.¹ Three miles below this place, the traders informed Johnston, were the remains of a British post, where there was still a fine apple orchard. From "Parc aux vaches" to the spot marked as the site of Fort St. Joseph is, according to modern surveys, a distance of a little

¹ John Kinzie lived here before his removal to Chicago in 1804. Today the site is occupied by the hamlet of Bertrand, about three miles south of Niles.

over two and three-fourths miles in a straight line. Thus the statement recorded by Johnston is in substantial agreement with the evidence afforded by the explorations of the group of modern investigators as to the location of Fort St. Joseph.

Statement of Mr. Lewis H. Beeson to the writer. I take this opportunity to record my obligation to Mr. Beeson for much of the information on which this article is based.